

THE EUROPEAN UNION TRAINING MISSION AND THE STRUGGLE FOR A NEW MODEL ARMY IN MALI

Denis M. TULL

West Africa Researcher at IRSEM

ABSTRACT

The constant deterioration of the security environment in Mali since 2016 has drawn renewed attention to the state of Mali's armed and security forces, as well as outside assistance to rebuilding them. With over 500 staff and an annual budget of €16 million, the European Union Training Mission (EUTM Mali) is Mali's largest security force assistance provider in terms of training and advise. This paper outlines seven contextual, political and operational challenges that continue to hamper the impact of security force assistance. Taken together, they underscore the shared responsibilities of both recipients and providers with respect to the modest results of security force assistance.

CONTENT

Introduction	2
Security Assistance and EUTM Mali	3
Multitasking: Fighting and Rebuilding	5
Supply-Driven Security Assistance	6
Lack of Coordination.....	7
Insufficient and Ineffective Training	9
Diverging Interests.....	10
Resistance to Change.....	11
An Institutional Vacuum	12
Conclusion	13

INTRODUCTION

Building and strengthening competent defense and security forces in Mali has been an international priority since the arrival of French and international intervention forces in the country in 2013. Together with making peace between Bamako and northern Tuareg rebels, the revamping of the security sector is depicted as a prerequisite for stabilization and peacebuilding.¹ Notwithstanding more recent discursive insistence on a comprehensive approach and related concepts (e.g. 4D), it is not exaggerated to say that security sector assistance is painted as an elementary part of the solution to Mali's troubles.

Unfortunately, there is little evidence that the Malian government and the community of its international backers are on track to achieve this goal, quite on the contrary. Since at least 2016, Mali has been suffering a fairly linear deterioration of security. After their eviction by Operation Serval, so-called jihadist or terrorist groups in the north successfully reorganized and keep inflicting many casualties on the Malian defense forces (Forces armées maliennes, FAMA), as well as the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Meanwhile, allied jihadist groups under the heading of the Katiba Macina have launched an insurrection in the central Mopti and Segou regions, taking de facto control of vast rural areas while state representatives such as administrators, teachers and security forces have withdrawn to towns or even further south to the capital of Bamako.

The degradation of insecurity and its spread within Mali and across its borders to neighboring Niger and Burkina Faso is not only happening despite the presence of Bamako-allied foreign forces, i.e. MINUSMA, the Joint Force of the G5 Sahel countries and the regional French counter-terrorism Operation Barkhane, which has most of its 4,500 troops deployed to Mali. Insecurity is also spreading in spite of significant outside assistance to Mali's army and domestic security forces (police, gendarmerie, National Guard).

This research note outlines several factors that account for the difficulties of security sector assistance in Mali to achieve a level of progress that would enable Mali's defense and security forces to at least contain, if not defeat its non-state competitors. Its focus will be on the Malian army and its largest provider of assistance, the EU Training Mission (EUTM) Mali. EUTM Mali offers similar services than its name sakes in Somalia and the Central African Republic. However, with up to 600 mandated staff and an annual budget of €16 million, it is much bigger than its sister missions.²

1. For useful analysis of Mali's tottering peace process, see Alex Thurston, *Mali's Tragic But Persistent Status Quo*, Dakar, Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, 2018; Arthur Boutellis, Marie-Joelle Zahar, *A Process in Search of Peace: Lessons from the Inter-Malian Agreement*, New York, International Peace Institute, 2017.

2. EUTM CAR (created in 2015) has up to 181 personnel with an annual budget of about €13 million. EUTM Somalia was established in 2010, has roughly 200 members and a budget of €11 million.

SECURITY ASSISTANCE AND EUTM MALI

Security sector assistance has become a major tool of security policy over the past decade, especially in places where so-called state weakness and armed insurrections are said to threaten international peace and security.³ Ultimately, however, outside powers have limited interests in these places and they shy away from the significant costs and risks that are associated with direct military intervention. Instead their preference is for a smaller footprint that seeks to enhance the military and security effectiveness of local and national allies, usually embattled state authorities.⁴

Security sector assistance in terms of training, advising and equipping is perceived as an effective, relatively cheap and low-risk engagement.⁵ Its renewed popularity is closely linked to terrorism and other non-state phenomena (migration, organized crime) that policy-makers often frame as transnational risks.

Since the outbreak of the crisis in 2012, an increasing number of actors, states and organizations have provided Mali with copious amounts of security sector assistance. According to an incomplete count, no fewer than seventy different projects to assist Mali's security sector (justice, defense, internal security) were being implemented as of early 2017, and this compilation only included EU, UN, Japanese and Western partners.⁶ Since then, nearly all of these partners have expanded their activities, as have other states like China, Russia, and Turkey. The assistance provided encompasses a wide range of activities and support packages, all intent on augmenting the capacities and capabilities of the Malian army – and sometimes its reform. Typical low key examples are workshops and other relatively short-term seminars, longer and more ambitious training within and outside of the country, the deployment of consultants and advisers, some of whom are embedded in Malian ministries. Finally external partners also provide infrastructural support (building or rehabilitating offices, barracks, military hospitals, car workshops, weapon storage depots etc.), equipment (boots, first aid-kits etc.), and sometimes lethal weapons.

The EU has been particularly active with capacity-building efforts in the Sahel.⁷ In addition to EUTM Mali, it has deployed two separate missions to provide assistance to domestic security agencies in both Mali and Niger, i.e. EUCAP Sahel-Mali (since 2014) and EUCAP Sahel-Niger (since 2012).⁸ These have the mandate to help local security agencies in com-

3. Stephen Biddle, "Building Security Forces & Stabilizing Nations: The Problem of Agency," *Daedalus*, 146:4, 2017, p. 126–38; William Reno, "Fictional States & Atomized Public Spheres: A Non-Western Approach to Fragility," *Daedalus*, 146:4, 2017, p. 139–51.

4. It is of course not a new approach. Security sector assistance was a cornerstone of Cold War security policies and proxy wars on both sides of the conflict. See for example Walter C. Ladwig, "Influencing Clients in Counterinsurgency: U.S. Involvement in El Salvador's Civil War, 1979–92," *International Security*, 41:1, 2016, p. 99–146; S. Biddle, "Building Security Forces & Stabilizing Nations," *op. cit.*

5. Statement of General Thomas D. Waldhauser, United States Africa Command, before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, Washington DC, 7 February 2019.

6. The Geneva Center for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), *Cartographie du soutien de la communauté internationale en matière de sécurité et de justice au Mali*, Geneva, 2017.

7. Andrew Lebovich, *Halting Ambition: EU Migration and Security Policy in the Sahel*, Paris, European Council on Foreign Relations, 2018.

8. On EUCAP-Sahel Niger, see Léonard Colomba-Petteng, *La politique étrangère et de sécurité commune à l'épreuve du terrain nigérien*, Paris, Fondation Robert Schumann, 2019.

batting organized crime, terrorism and migration. Similar to EUTM Mali, their mandate has also come to include support for the Joint Force of the G5 Sahel states. In Mali further EU support in the guise of capacity-building is channeled through various projects, the largest of which is the Programme d'appui au renforcement de la sécurité dans la région de Mopti et à la gestion des zones frontalières (PARSEC). Another noteworthy security assistance initiative is the GARSIS programme (Groupes d'Action Rapides – Surveillance et Intervention au Sahel), which seeks to enhance the operational capacities of gendarmerie units across the Sahel. Both PARSEC (€29 million) and GARSIS (€66 million) are financed through the EU's Emergency Trust Fund that seeks to reduce irregular migration.⁹

EUTM Mali is a train and advice mission. It was established in 2013 to help rebuilding the Malian army after it was overrun by the joint insurrection of Tuareg separatists and armed Islamist groups, and which occupied a large swath of Mali's national territory. A more or less accidental coup in Bamako, itself triggered by the political and military crisis, put the army in further disarray. EUTM Mali's main objective is to enhance the capabilities of Mali's armed forces in order to promote stabilization and the restoration of state authority throughout the national territory. EUTM pursues this goal by training military personnel (units, soldiers and officers) and by offering advice at various levels (command and control, logistics and human resources). Training is provided by the Education and Training Task Force (ETTF) based in Koulikoro, close to Bamako. EUTM's initial focus there was on training combat battalions (Groupement Tactique InterArmes, GTIA) for immediate deployment to the battle field. This approach has been phased out in favor of training for smaller tactical sub-units, train the trainer courses, company commander courses and specialized individual training (snipers, demining, Close Air Support etc.).

The Advisory Task Force (ATF) is located in the mission headquarters in Bamako and has designated advisors deployed to the Malian ministry of defense and the FAMa hierarchy. It has played a key role in the development of Mali's first ever Loi d'orientation et de programmation militaire (LOPM), which defined FAMa priorities between 2015 to 2019 in terms of recurrent spending and capital investment in new equipment and the recruitment of new personnel. EUTM is currently involved in the conception of the second LOPM, covering the 2020-2024 period. It is also engaged in advice and support to build up a new and modernized doctrinal body, among other things.

EUTM is currently operating under its fourth mandate (2018-2020), which consolidated substantial modifications that were introduced with the adoption of EUTM's previous third mandate (2016-2018). These notably included a spatially more flexible approach. The mission's area of operations was extended to the southern bank of the Niger river, including Timbuktu and Gao, in order to move closer to the FAMa troops and their areas of operations, effectively providing decentralized training activities to units and army headquarters of the various military regions. Finally, it also began to support the G5 Sahel by providing assistance to the Malian contingents of the Joint Force of the G5. Assistance to the

9. David Kipp, *From Exception to Rule – the EU Trust Fund for Africa*, Berlin, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 2018.

operationalisation of the G5 Joint Force was further expanded.¹⁰ EUTM has a military staff of roughly 500 personnel, one third of which consists of trainers and advisors, the rest being support staff (medical staff, protection force etc.). Most are based in Koulikoro. As of 2019, the ATF had a staff of only 28 advisers, compared to a mandated 50.

Together with its sister mission EUCAP Sahel-Mali, which has provided training and advice for Mali's internal security forces since 2015, EUTM is the single most important provider of security assistance in Mali. In terms of visibility and activities, its output is impressive. For example, by June 2019, about 14,000 FAMA had received some form of training from EUTM. Yet, the deterioration of the security situation in Mali seems to belie the idea that EUTM Mali has a significant impact on FAMA performance, that is, their ability to at least hold on to their positions and prevent an expansion of insecurity. This is not to suggest that EUTM should be held responsible for the situation. Not only are there many other players in the game. More important, many variables shape the overall situation in Mali on which EUTM has little if any influence.¹¹

MULTITASKING: FIGHTING AND REBUILDING

Considering that security sector assistance is usually not provided to well governed and peaceful states, it represents by definition an ambitious and difficult endeavor. Army reconstruction in Mali is no exception.¹² The FAMA are an exceedingly feeble organization, which for decades primarily assumed social and political functions rather than military ones. The onset of political liberalization in the early 1990s contributed to the army's neglect and degradation, while the 2012 coup severely disorganized the institution.¹³ But reconstruction and reform efforts face additional challenges. While rebuilding and reforming an army is a strenuous task at the best of (peace) times, everywhere, the FAMA are heavily engaged in operations, an evident but often overlooked fact that imposes significant constraints on EUTM and other assistance providers.

The first restriction is that the priority of Mali's political and military leaders is the war effort, not rebuilding and reforming its military tool. This means that outside security assistance providers find Malian interlocutors with somewhat different priorities from their own. But even where and when objectives overlap, the resources and capacities of Malian partners are necessarily limited, considering that they simultaneously attend to the multi-task of waging war and rebuilding the army.

This has a number of implications, not the least of which is an overall absence of strategic directions by the Malian government. This strategic void means that partners do not

10. For details of the successive mandates see <http://eutmmali.eu/en/mandates/>

11. Niagalé Bagayoko, *Le Processus de réforme du secteur de la sécurité au Mali*, Montreal, Centre FrancoPaix en résolution des conflits et missions de paix, 2018.

12. Michael Shurkin et al., *Building Armies, Building Nations. Toward a New Approach to Security Force Assistance*, Santa Monica, CA, Rand Corporation, 2017.

13. Marc-André Boisvert, "Autopsie d'une défaillance: cohésion, discipline et leadership au sein des Forces armées maliennes en 2012-2013," Paris, IRSEM, 2016.

find a Malian framework that could and indeed should orient outside partners' assistance efforts. The LOPM, the first of its kind in Mali, initiated and heavily supported by EUTM Mali, is a potentially useful instrument, but it cannot replace a more political framework that analyzes the strategic environment and draws implications for security and defense policies.

A second implication has to do with the fact that the FAMa are a relatively small army that is both spread thinly and under heavy pressure from its adversaries. An estimated 75% of its troops are engaged in military operations at any given point in time. This means that those FAMa available to receive EUTM training or advice are not only exhausted but also few in numbers. For instance, the repeated difficulties of EUTM to receive sufficient numbers of FAMa soldiers for training in Koulikoro is therefore more than just a logistical problem of large distances separating the theatre of operations from the training base.

What passes for a conventional operational cycle of planning, preparing, executing, and assessing operations is weak or barely existent in Mali. This particularly affects the troops, most of whom spend nine or more months per year in operations. Officers may be less exposed. Those deemed to be excellent are frequently abroad for further training and qualifications, leaving a leadership vacuum in Mali and on the field.

Beyond the stress of the battlefield and an exhausting cycle of operations, a related contextual factor is that the FAMa, like most other organizations of the Malian state, suffer from the absence of a minimum of stability in their political and institutional environment. Since 2013, Mali has had five different Prime Ministers and no less than seven Ministers of Defense. The chief of staff of the army has likewise changed several times. This context makes it difficult for the FAMa to work on a more or less stable and coherent set of priorities and policies. It also contributed to uncertainties among its foreign partners.

Finally, the stumbling peace process is an obstacle to the reconstruction and reform of the army. Since institutional reforms of the security sector were linked to progress in the implementation of the demobilization and integration aspects of the Alger peace accord, the prevailing distrust among the signatory parties around DDR and the logic of the peace accord has held hostage any progress on security sector reform that may have been achievable.

SUPPLY-DRIVEN SECURITY ASSISTANCE

The key implication of an absent Malian-defined strategic framework is that much security sector assistance is supply-driven and therefore foreign-owned.¹⁴ On the surface, this is not immediately perceptible as Malian counterparts rarely if ever reject the offers that their foreign partners put on the table (training, equipment, advice). But polite agreement is different from setting out real needs and priorities. Many security assistance operatives inside and outside of EUTM know this, but they have little incentive or space

14. Denis M. Tull, "Rebuilding Mali's Army: The Dissonant Relationship between Mali and Its International Partners," *International Affairs*, 95:2, 2019, p. 405-22.

to engage in a slow, burdensome and potentially frustrating dialogue with uncertain outcomes with their Malian partners to identify actually existing needs and thus to help build local ownership of the reconstruction effort. Part of the reason is that their institutions and headquarters expect them to identify and execute projects and disburse money to manifest the organization's efficiency and visibility. Another reason may be the difficulty to find common ground with Malian partners whose expectations in terms of the kind and amount of assistance may be different from those that their outside partners are able and willing to provide. The perceived weakness of the demand-side and thus local ownership may be deplored by some partners and may produce ineffective outcomes. In many cases, however, it is not an inconvenient situation for outside actors. It is instrumental in avoiding difficult discussions with Malian partners, enabling outside actors to provide assistance as they see fit. The result is a situation in which a significant percentage of FAMA-dedicated support activities are proposed, conceived and directed by foreign partners rather than reflecting needs and priorities on the Malian demand-side.¹⁵ The frequently articulated expectation of outsiders that Malians should "appropriate" ideas for reform and reconstruction is utterly misguided.¹⁶

Supply-driven assistance creates significant costs, raises sustainability and interoperability challenges and may actually do little to strengthen capabilities -- where it does not weaken them. For example, many partners tend to provide one-off donations such as a shipment of vehicles (trucks, ambulances etc.), often second-hand. Few are those partners who actually wonder if their donation fits Malian needs or the profile of the existing Malian fleet, that is, if the vehicles match models and types that the FAMA already have or if they have the resources for the management and upkeep of these vehicles. The result is that many of these vehicles will never see the field of operations or else they will fall into disrepair on the first occasion because neither budgets, spare parts nor mechanical expertise were programmed. In other words, such donations in kind tend to create significant transaction and financial costs that may neutralize their intended operational benefit, or even have disruptive effects. Taken together this speaks to the neglect of the appropriateness and sustainability of assistance and the absorptive capacity of Malian partners.

LACK OF COORDINATION

A further drawback of the demand-and-supply disconnect is the poor coordination of outside assistance. It is neither enforced by the Malian side, nor is it adequately assumed by donors. This includes those from Europe, although information-sharing and tacit coordination efforts have been enhanced recently. A limited number of often partial groupings exist that facilitate the flow and exchange of information such as the Instance de coordination au Mali (ICM), a quarterly meeting of Barkhane, MINUSMA, EUTM, EUCAP and the FAMA officials that was created in 2018. Furthermore, the creation of the Joint Force of the

15. Interview with EUTM officer, 10 June 2017.

16. N. Bagayoko, *Le Processus de réforme du secteur de la sécurité au Mali*, op. cit., p. 30.

G5 Sahel initiative has triggered certain efforts to coordinate pledges and projects within the framework of a Brussels based “Coordination board.”

Overall, however, little more than information sharing seems to occur. This leads to a vicious circle as outsiders blame Malians for a lack of strategic direction while Malians complain (though rarely to partners) about intrusive and overbearing outsiders who flood them with assistance without consulting them. The entire Malian Ministry of Defense has one dedicated officer serving as a focal point of foreign security assistance partners. This throws doubts on the capacity and the political will on the Malian side to impose a certain level of coherency and coordination. Some European partners strongly argue that it should be the task of the Malian side to coordinate outside partners, but weak or absent responsiveness to their own proposals create frustrations and impatience, prompting some to go ahead with their initiatives through their own channels. It is in this sense that some EUTM officials see an important task of their mission in “helping our Malian partners to articulate their needs.”¹⁷

However, the absence of Malian ownership should not lead one to ignore that foreign partners often lack the political will to seek exchange within the ever larger circle of outside donors. Sometimes this coordination is not even guaranteed within one and the same donor nation as various ministries and agencies or individual officials deployed with international missions (EU, UN) vie for influence, visibility and disbursements. As one European official noted: “Coordination is a challenge for the donors and the Malians. If 13 partners offer roughly the same thing, this does not make sense and cannot be effective.” The problem is highlighted by the way in which some external actors (i.e. EUCAP Sahel-Mali) have identified “coordination” with other donors as a distinct project goal.¹⁸ However, most foreign and European interlocutors remain skeptical about the prospects of coordination. Everybody agrees on the necessity of coordination, but no one wants to be coordinated.

The challenge of external coordination also comes into relief in the way that EUTM and its different national components work. To an extent, EUTM seeks to convey European standards to the FAMA and to homogenize norms and practices that should prevail inside the Malian army. However, these European standards do not exist as such, given that Swedes, Spaniards, Germans etc. all have their own standards, which they, as mission members, impart on their Malian partners. With the frequent change of national EUTM contingents also change the norms and practices that EUTM officials convey in their training or advisory role. It is therefore no small irony that the mission seeks to promote a centralization and harmonization of norms, practices and doctrines that its own members cannot live up to, not to mention the confusion that the heterogeneity of European advise and training may create on the side of the Malian partners.¹⁹ In this way, EUTM and the myriad of other external security assistance partners contribute to the saturation of the Malian army with a multiplicity of military concepts and cultures of foreign origin that uneasily coexist.²⁰

17. Interviews with former EUTM officer, 17 January 2019 and EUTM advisor, 8 December 2017.

18. Denis M. Tull, *Mali, the G5 and Security Sector Assistance: Political Obstacles to Effective Cooperation*, Berlin, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 2017.

19. Interviews with European advisor, 6 June 2018 and former EUTM advisor, 7 June 2018.

20. Interview with EUTM officers, 8 December 2016 and 11 June 2018.

INSUFFICIENT AND INEFFECTIVE TRAINING

EUTM's initial goal was to enable the Malian government to reconquer and control the north. This was done by training a critical mass of soldiers and battalions that had received basic training, but were also expected to carry out military tasks. To this effect, EUTM trained eight GTIA battalions, each consisting of about 600 to 700 soldiers during the first three years of the mission (February 2013-April 2016), thus a rough total of 5,000 troops. GTIA training sessions initially comprised three months before their duration was cut by half.

The training offered by EUTM has been the subject of frequent and persistent critique, much of which is shared by mission members themselves who readily bemoan the political and institutional constraints that limit the impact of the mission. For instance, critics and EUTM officials have repeatedly explained that the short duration of EUTM trainings was insufficient to have much impact on the battlefield effectiveness of the FAMa.²¹ Malian soldiers were able to improve on some basic skills, but they were not imparted the tactical competencies to operate in a hostile environment.

EUTM training activities expanded when EUTM decided to offer re-training to GTIA units that had previously received training in Koulikoro. Beginning in July 2015, the retraining of GTIAs did not bring significant progress, however. While the idea of improving and expanding on previously imparted skills was convincing, its implementation faced significant hurdles. Thus it turned out that the GTIAs that returned to Koulikoro for re-training only remotely resembled the initially trained units.²² Of the soldiers previously trained, little more than half were found to remain in the battalions, among other things due to casualties and a chaotic human resource management. The fluctuation inside the units also ran against the idea to create cohesive and effective battalions. Last but not least, it illustrated the constraints that EUTM faced in actually knowing and assessing its own degree of effectiveness. Once Malian soldiers leave Koulikoro EUTM has no knowledge about their performance, assignments and trajectory. In other words, there is no way for EUTM to actually monitor and evaluate its own impact on the FAMa, except for occasional reports by Barkhane which accompanies Malian army units in action and can thus provide some feedback to EUTM.²³ As other foreign assistance partners, EUTM lacks solid evidence for the tentative and hopeful assumption that more training increases the effectiveness of Mali's armed forces. The unintended consequences of security sector assistance remain also largely unknown. Against the background of these deficits, some have therefore suggested a significant intensification of outside assistance in the guise of mentoring.²⁴

On the positive side, EUTM has undertaken a number of noteworthy adjustments over time. For similar reasons as those mentioned above, however, the impact of train the trainers projects or specialized training courses remains uncertain. Similarly, EUTM has sought to enhance the sustainability of its assistance by supporting the training academies of the

21. Interview with former EUTM officer, 3 July 2018.

22. A similar observation was already made by US officers before the 2012 conflict. See Simon J. Powelson, *Enduring Engagement Yes, Episodic Engagement No: Lessons for SOF from Mali*, Monterey, CA, Naval Postgraduate School, 2013.

23. Interview with EUTM officer, 5 June 2018.

24. Numerous interviews with MINUSMA and EUTM officials.

Malian army. However, these efforts met stiff resistance by parts of the FAMa hierarchy and are subject to constant and often opaque negotiations. Finally, EUTM has broadened its area of operations by creating mobile training and advisory teams that were directly deployed to the Malian units.

Internal and external critics of EUTM frequently argue that the EU is its own worst enemy, bemoaning the fact that EU training is not supplemented by the provision of vital equipment. Needless to say, this goes far beyond the Malian case and is the subject of long-standing and ongoing discussions between member states and EU institutions.²⁵ For the time being, this leads to situations in which FAMa soldiers are trained with equipment that the Malian army neither possesses nor is likely to dispose of in the near future. The broad implication is that significant parts of EUTM training provided are a far cry away from the real conditions under which FAMa recruits do operate. Under these circumstances, European and EU officials are worried about the political credibility of the EU and EUTM in the eyes of their Malian partners.²⁶ They also point out that security sector assistance takes place in an increasingly competitive environment. EUTM Mali, it is argued, is the largest player, but it may be outflanked by competitors such as Turkey, Russia or China which have fewer qualms to deliver equipment and arms to the FAMa.²⁷

DIVERGING INTERESTS

If the aim of EUTM is to contribute to the rebuilding of a competent, professional and effective army, it is doubtful whether Mali's political and/or military leaders share this objective. First, the Malian government has become used to rely on foreign forces, effectively delegating security to them. The UN Stabilization Mission MINUSMA with some 14,000 uniformed personnel and the French counter-terrorism Operation Barkhane, which has most of its 4,500 troops in Mali, provide Bamako with a security umbrella against rebels and terrorist groups. While these forces may not have the means and mandate to provide security and stability in most parts of Mali, they directly and indirectly provide security to the political center in Bamako and its ruling class.

The externalization of security also constitutes a security assurance against Mali's own coup-prone army. Since Mali's independence in 1960, the military has intervened five times in the political arena. While two of these coups failed (1976 and 1978), three military coups were successful, all led by junior officers: in 1968 by Lieutenant Moussa Traoré, in 1991 by Lieutenant-Colonel Amadou Toumani Touré and in 2012 by Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo. According to one Malian observer, the coup by Captain Sanogo and his associates had a military and a political dimension: it was a *military* coup in that it was a revolt

25. In 2018, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Mogherini presented a proposal for a European Peace Facility (EPF) that is designed to allow EU financing of all Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) external action with military implications, including train and equip assistance to partner countries such as Mali. The EPF could be in place by 2021.

26. Interview with European military advisor, 4 June 2018.

27. Interview with former EUTM advisor, 28 May 2019.

directed against a dysfunctional and incompetent military hierarchy that had abandoned its troops in the face of Jihadist and Tuareg insurgents (indeed, no senior military officer was among the coup leaders);²⁸ and it was a *political* coup in that its leaders took aim at a government they accused of widespread corruption and ineffectiveness, including in its handling of the conflict in the north.²⁹

As multiple Malian interlocutors have suggested, the factors that drove the accidental coup of 2012 are still very much present. Political neglect of the military, a lack of strategic direction to win the current conflict, corruption and incompetence, and pervasive pressure on a military that has suffered countless defeats and casualties. Protests by wives and family members of servicemen against the government have erupted several times, as have rumors about an imminent coup.³⁰ As long as foreign forces protect vital regime interests, the government has little reason to identify the reconstruction and reform of the armed forces as a priority.³¹ However, the deterioration of the security situation, especially in the centre of the country, may slowly modify this rationale.

RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

EUTM Mali has encountered recurrent obstacles in its efforts to assist Mali's military force and authorities. Resistance was especially notable with regard to EUTM projects to promote governance and efficiency aspects in the security sector. For several years, for instance, EUTM has failed to convince the Malian authorities of the merits of an information logistics system (Système d'Information Logistique, SILOG), which aims at improving the acquisition, management and distribution of logistical resources within the armed forces.

Similarly, EUTM has sought to work on the management of FAMA's human resources, a perennial challenge according to many Malian and international interlocutors.³² Basic information such as soldiers' profiles, their qualifications, training received, areas/units of past and present deployment etc. are severely deficient, as some Malian officials concede.³³ Western advisors argue that such a system is indispensable to organize the rational use and deployment of military staff, develop coherent career paths, align capacities with long-term needs etc. in order to build an effective army. Both projects have been blocked through endless cycles of meetings, negotiations and invisible acts of Malian resistance, attributed by many foreign advisors to vested interests, including rackets and corruption. For the same reasons, it is alleged that EUTM's efforts to establish a new payroll system have also stalled. This was so, foreign officials argue, because FAMA officials greatly benefit from the status

28. Marc-André Boisvert, "[2012 : L'étrange défaite de l'armée malienne](#)," 18 January 2017.

29. Interview with Malian analyst, 12 December 2017.

30. "Le président malien qualifie 'd'élucubrations' les spéculations sur un putsch", AFP, 6 October 2019 ; "Mali: enfants et femmes de soldats en colère dans la rue après un lourd revers militaire", AFP, 2 October 2019.

31. Interview with French military officer, 6 June 2017.

32. M.-A. Boisvert, "[2012 : L'étrange défaite de l'armée malienne](#)," *op. cit.*

33. Interview with military official, 11 February 2019.

quo, permitting them to seize parts of the salaries of military staff or even the salaries of fictitious personnel.³⁴

After years of obstructions and impatient, but unheeded calls, the EU eventually acknowledged reality by imposing conditionalities. It tied a small part of its budget support (€14 million) to progress in these reform projects by making improvements in human resource management as one of 13 performance indicators.³⁵ As of early 2019, a first review came to the conclusion that no progress had been achieved. To some, tying some EU development assistance to reforms in the security sector was a relatively strong political signal, with particular insistence on the significance that the EU Commission's Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO) had agreed to align with this initiative.³⁶ Others, however, have argued that the derisory sums at stake would not create much leverage and that the EU and its members states had no realistic chance to win this waiting game with the Malian government.³⁷

The point here is that the Malian defense sector, as presumably the wider system of state governance in Mali, is characterized by features whose mechanisms and impact are not easily legible to outside actors. Vested interests may account for much, but so do weak capacities and limited resources.³⁸ For example, in preparation of the upcoming LOPM, EUTM efforts to evaluate the implementation of the previous one were hampered by the fact that the Malian authorities did not possess or share much needed statistics and other information. Fraud and corruption almost certainly play a role, but so do weak capacities to oversee the planning and expenditure process. Finally, EUTM's assistance is also hurt by Malian concerns over national sovereignty. Given that the defense sector is the politically sensitive core of sovereignty, it is only to be expected that Malian officials do not put all cards on the table that EUTM officials would like to see. Issues concerning human resources, including the actual size of the armed forces, the actual defense budget and finally ongoing military operations are among those questions that are shielded from the scrutiny of outside partners such as EUTM.

AN INSTITUTIONAL VACUUM

Perhaps the greatest weakness of security sector assistance in Mali is that it works around various institutional problems rather than seeking to address them. Capacity-building with its focus on enhanced tactical and operational proficiency and effectiveness of Mali's armed forces is likely to have limited results in the absence of institutional change.

The first institutional barrier is the Malian state. Even if EUTM and other security assistance providers somehow managed to lift the FAMA to a satisfactory level, how sustainable

34. Interviews with EUTM officer, 8 December 2017 and European military adviser, 15 June 2017.

35. Specifically, it asked for the effective implementation of the *Système d'information de gestion des ressources humaines (SIGRH)*.

36. Interviews with European officials, 11 and 12 February 2019.

37. Interview with Western diplomat, 4 February 2019.

38. Morgane Le Cam, "Au Mali, le système est infesté par la corruption et les citoyens y sont habitués," *Le Monde*, 1 August 2019.

would this army be? Put differently: an effective military cannot be sustained in the absence of other effective state structures.³⁹ While the question of wider institutional reform within the Malian state cannot be discussed here, there is limited evidence that either the Malian authorities or its foreign partners are invested in the type of political and administrative reforms that would render the state more effective and legitimate.⁴⁰

A second institutional challenge concerns the institutional tapestry of the security sector and security sector assistance itself. Mali's security sector suffers from corruption and a dysfunctional organizational culture, with devastating effects on human resources management and logistics, to name but two areas that have an immediate bearing on battlefield effectiveness. As long as these problems show no signs of abating, there is little prospect that the FAMA will become a more professional army.⁴¹ Some would argue that indicators such as corruption and fraud are actually increasing which is linked to increased defense expenditure. The authorities' very limited and largely technical gestures towards security sector reform, which are not underpinned by political backing, are telling in this regard. Foreign security assistance providers share some responsibility for this given their emphasis on tactical and operational objectives that are "threats-based" and "military-centric" rather than focusing in equal measure on institution-building to improve security governance and civil-military relations.⁴² EUTM Mali has to be credited for being one of the few outside actors to actually seek to address at least some of these challenges such as transparency, though so far, as explained above, with little success. With the exception of a few workshops here and there, cornerstones of an effective security sector such as accountability, the rule of law and democratic oversight are relatively neglected by outside security assistance providers. Overall, then, it can be argued that both the government and its partners have shown little commitment to substantive institutional reforms aimed at professionalizing the security sector. The deteriorating security situation has only reinforced this attitude, creating a cycle of short-term urgency that saps attention and capital from addressing long-term challenges.

CONCLUSION

Security sector assistance is a response to deficits that foreign principals have identified. From an outside and often Western point of view, these deficits and weaknesses are numerous and extensive. From this type of analysis, then, derives a whole gamut of needs that are to be addressed through myriad assistance proposals. Frequently, they are supply-driven and may have little relevance or pertinence from a recipient point of view. They may also overwhelm the institutional and political capacities of Malian partners, as some

39. Bruce Whitehouse, "[How US Military Assistance Failed in Mali](#)," 21 April 2014.

40. Catriona Craven-Matthews/Pierre Englebort, "A Potemkin State in the Sahel? The Empirical and the Fictional in Malian State Reconstruction," *African Security*, 11:1, 2018, p.1-31.

41. The infamous saga of two Puma helicopters of the Malian army illustrates the point. See "Mali : des hélicoptères 'Puma' qui posent question," *RFI*, 13 August 2019.

42. Christopher Holshek, "Mali's Teachable Moment: The Primacy of Civil Authority in Security Sector Development and Assistance," *Conflict Trends*, 2013:4, p. 46; D. M. Tull, *Mali, the G5 and Security Sector Assistance*, *op. cit.*

providers of security assistance readily concede. In Mali, this has become a self-enforcing cycle since 2013. The more the security situation has worsened, the more outsiders have stepped in, proliferating in numbers and attendant initiatives and offers of assistance. As a consequence, Malian agency in the reconstruction of the army is at risk of being marginalized by impatient outside partners who are primarily concerned with terrorist threats over everything else and who often show insufficient nuance regarding the identities and strategies of insurgent groups.⁴³

Broadly speaking, two sets of factors may explain the relatively modest results that security force assistance in Mali has achieved, even in the case of EUTM Mali, although it has the double advantage of being a multi-dimensional and enduring provider of support. The first one is that many of the obstacles to army reconstruction are either not targeted by assistance providers or they are in fact out of reach. This concerns contextual and structural factors such as the halting peace process and the legacies preceding and contributing to the current crisis such as the political economy of the Malian state. For example, outsiders simply have little leverage in revamping the FAMA's human resource management against the resistance of vested interests.

The second set of factors concerns the deficits and inconsistencies of security assistance itself in terms of strategies, methods and priorities. While improvements in these areas are no guarantee for better results, they are a necessary condition to increase the effectiveness of assistance itself. Some of them may forever be illusive, such as real international coordination. Others may be more attainable and it is notable and worth emphasizing that the EU has throughout the existence of EUTM Mali undertaken significant adjustments to its mandate. This attests to processes of institutional learning and adaptation that cannot be taken for granted. Future and potentially appropriate adjustments may include a permanent presence in central and north Mali rather than simply operating in these areas through mobile training and advisory teams. Others may be politically impracticable, such as qualitatively enhancing EUTM Mali by tasking it to undertake so-called mentoring that would require EUTM military to accompany FAMA in hostile terrain. While military officers with experience in other violent places often argue that mentoring is an effective approach, it is also an extremely risky one that will likely result in casualties. Not many EU member states are prepared to take the political risk to put their troops in harm's way for the sake of Mali or the Sahel, for that matter.⁴⁴ But even if mentoring in one form or another may prove effective, it will only obtain strategic progress if the non-military part of the equation will work; that is, to hold and stabilize those rural areas that remain easy prey for insurgent groups. Previous initiatives such as the Malian government's Plan de sécurisation intégrée des régions du Centre (*PSIRC*) of 2017 provide few reasons for optimism in this regard.

43. For a clear-eyed analysis see Mathieu Pellerin, *Les Violences armées au Sahara. Du djihadisme aux insurrections?*, Paris, Institut français des relations internationales, 2019.

44. As a result, France initiated a European coalition of the willing (Task Force Takuba), which solicits special operations forces from EU member states. It is expected to be on the ground in the second half of 2020.

Denis M. Tull is currently a researcher at the Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM) in Paris, on leave from the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP). His areas of research include Africa's international relations, intervention, and UN peacekeeping, armed conflict and state building in the Sahel and in Central Africa. His papers have been published in *International Security*, *International Peacekeeping*, *African Affairs* and the *Journal of Modern African Studies*, among others.

Contact: denis.tull@irsem.fr